Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology

By

David Thomas

BRILL

CONTENTS

MUSLIM THEOLOGIANS AND CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

By the beginning of the fourth/tenth century Islamic theology had achieved a level of maturity which made it an admirably versatile instrument for interpreting the ways in which God and the world existed and related to one another. Muslim theologians active at this time brought together the disparate questions and issues that had occupied attention for more than a century into a unity of thought, and produced the first works that can be called treatises of Islamic theology. Ambitious in design and often prodigious in size, in their fully developed form these included treatments of everything from the problem of knowledge and the contingent nature of the world to matters of individual morality and the legitimate leadership of the Islamic state. Integral to their treatment of the array of religious questions was the examination and refutation of other religions. The ways in which the various authors approached the claims they identified from non-Muslim believers, and Christians in particular, tell a great deal about the authors' regard for them at this time, and even more about their regard for their own intellectual discipline and the faith of which it was a subtle articulation.

Christians in Islamic Society

By the turn of the fourth/tenth century Christians living under Islamic rule had more or less come to terms with the situation in which they found themselves. They might look back on times when there had been no serious rivals to their claim to be the recipients of God's supreme and final disclosure to his creatures. But in the two and a half centuries since Muslim armies had begun to wrest for themselves tracts of Byzantine and Sasanian territory and established their own rule, Christians had come to acknowledge the potency of Islam as a faith as well as a polity, and the need to come to terms with it socially and intellectually.

Socially, Christians often benefited from Muslim rule because they had knowledge and skills that were valued in society. The sheer ability to run a bureaucracy, in which Byzantine local officials were expert, meant that Muslim imperial chanceries habitually included Christian secretaries. From time to time crack-downs on non-Muslims in important positions rendered them jobless—it is not impossible that John of Damascus's reason for withdrawing from his high office to a monastery was the arabization measures of Umayyad caliphs at the beginning of the second/eighth century[1]—but in general they were able to keep their positions as long as they maintained ambition in check. The medical knowledge they guarded as their own, their facility in Greek and Syriac, and the technical acquisitions they preserved from former times all guaranteed for them prized positions in a society that naturally expected the amenities of life and ambitiously sought the learning of the Greek world.

Christian professionals were thus respected and courted for the expertise they could give. But whether this meant they were greeted and welcomed is not at all clear. The fact that in a revealing diatribe against Christian excesses, the third/ninth century essayist and scholar Abū ʿUthmān al-Jāḥiẓ comments on them hiding the signs of their status which by law they were required to show in their dress, engaging in the sporting pastimes of Muslims, and adopting Muslim names,[2] is perhaps indicative of some unease with their lot and a desire to mask the differences that restrained them from full participation in society. But they were legally *dhimmīs*, 'protected people', and governed by regulations that might be enforced at any time to make them adhere to their separate status. The caliph al-Mutawakkil had actually invoked these regulations in 235/849–850 and 239/853–854, compelling Christians to display the yellow waist bands that denoted their non-Muslim loyalties and to put up signs of devils on their doorposts.[3] The fact that he soon withdrew these measures and that other caliphs rarely invoked them

[1] S. Griffith, '"Melkites", "Jacobites" and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth Century Syria', in D. Thomas, ed., *Syrian Christians under Islam, the first thousand years*, Leiden, 2001, (pp. 9–55) p. 21.

[2] Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Fī al-radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, ed. J. Finkel in *Thalāth rasāʾil li-Abī ʿUthmān al-Jāḥiẓ*, Cairo, 1926, pp. 17–18.

[3] Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-al-mulūk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje *et al.*, Leiden, 1879–1901, pp. 1389–1390, 1419; trans. J. Kraemer, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. XXXIV, 'Incipient Decline', Albany NY, 1989, pp. 89–90, 128–129.

will have come as scant comfort to people who saw the threat above them and must have feared it could fall at any time.

So while the true position of Christians in the urban society of third/ninth century Islam is beyond easy or absolute definition, it may well have been one of uneasy partnership with Muslims who in principle protected them and who eagerly sought their expertise, but not one of identification or participation in a society where they might be made to feel they properly belonged.

The anxiety of Christians and other non-Muslims will not have been allayed by the developments they witnessed in the society around them, as over time their own non-Muslim status became an accepted fact, the regulations that governed them as *dhimmīs* were elaborated into detailed codes standing ready to be implemented at any moment, and they saw themselves borne along by Arabic language, Islamic mores, and the intangible though irresistible characteristics of Muslim culture towards an identity that threatened to swamp their own. Conversions may well have exacerbated the sense of something lost, but above all else will have been the awareness of the need to explain their faith and defend it to their Muslim neighbours in terms that could be understood and might hopefully be accepted.

Intellectually, there are signs that at first Christians refused to take Islam seriously. John of Damascus' dismissal in the mid second/eighth century of Muḥammad as a fraud and the Qur'ān as an ignorant imitation of the Bible[4] gave way in the early third/ninth century to attempts by Arabic-speaking Christians to articulate their doctrines in terms of the distinctive *kalām* logic that Muslim intellectuals were currently employing. But they never entirely succeeded, and there are indications that they actually failed to understand fully what they were about. For example, the Nestorian 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's recasting of the Trinity as the divine essence endowed with two supreme attributes immediately raised questions among Muslims that remained familiar points of dispute for centuries (as is witnessed by arguments in the texts presented here), showing that 'Ammār could not successfully harness the concepts he employed to present his views.

---

[4] D.J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam, the "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"*, Leiden, 1972, pp. 132–133.

'Ammār was involved in a high-risk strategy.[5] As a contemporary of some of the greatest Mu'tazilī masters of Baṣra,[6] he evidently knew the debates between them and their opponents about the characterisation of God. The Mu'tazilīs, as insistent defenders of the absolute oneness of God, maintained that the essence of God was undifferentiated, and therefore that the qualities listed in the Qur'ān and deducible by reason, such as God's knowledge, power and life, could not derive from any really existent attributes that might be identified in addition to God's essence itself. Therefore, for them to say, for example, that God is knowing did not mean that he possesses an entitative attribute of knowledge, since this attribute would have to be eternal and formally distinguishable from God's essence, rendering his unity only relative. But their Muslim opponents argued that unless God's attributes are real, and derived from entities within the being of God, he cannot be endowed with them in any meaningful way. They used the formula, 'The attributes are neither God nor other than God' in order to safeguard this unity, but it is clear that their main concern was to preserve the proper means of knowing what God is like rather than to insist upon his simple, undifferentiated unity.

'Ammār the Nestorian clearly knew about this debate and sought to make use of it. He argued that the defenders of God's absolute unity were illogical because when they denied he had an attribute of life they implied he was lifeless, and when they denied he had an attribute of knowledge they implied he was ignorant. Thus God must possess real attributes. And then he argued that among the attributes that can rationally be ascribed to him, those of life and knowledge had priority as constitutive parts of his being and as the origins of all his other attributes. It followed that God and his two prime attributes of Life and Knowledge were what Christians refer to as the Trinity.

This is a neat proof, expressed entirely in terms that a Muslim theologian would appreciate, with the added elegance of identifying the Holy Spirit as God the Lifegiver and the Son as God the Word. But Muslim religious thinkers showed they were not convinced from a

---

    [5] S. Griffith, 'The Concept of *al-Uqnūm* in 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's Apology for the Doctrine of the Trinity', in *Actes du premier congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes* (*Goslar, Septembre 1980*), ed. S.K. Samir, Rome, 1982, pp. 169–191; D. Thomas, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early 'Abbasid Era', in L. Ridgeon, ed., *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, London, 2001, pp. 78–98.
    [6] Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, ed. M. Riḍā-Tajaddud, Tehran, 1971, p. 204.

fairly early stage. An obvious objection was to the prioritising of two attributes over others, such as power, speech or hearing. It is arbitrary to single these out, because in Muslim terms God must equally be endowed with the others as with these two. But a more serious objection, indicative of the Christian failure to grasp the implications of what they were becoming involved in, concerned the function of these attributes. For in Muslim understanding an attribute confers a quality upon its subject: thus knowledge makes someone knowing. But it does not confer a quality upon itself. And so, in 'Ammār's model the attribute of Life might make the Father and Son living but not itself, meaning that the Person of the Holy Spirit could not be alive. This fundamentally undermines the model and the doctrine. The argument was evidently employed in the course of the third/ninth century soon after 'Ammār wrote (maybe by the Mu'tazilī master Abū al-Hudhayl, who certainly argued against him),[7] and in the fourth/tenth century it became a staple of polemic.[8]

   'Ammār al-Baṣrī's coining of these Muslim theological techniques in the early third/ninth century shows at the least that Christians were beginning to acknowledge the seriousness of Islamic theology as an intellectual undertaking and thought they could use it for their own purposes. But it also shows that they knew it was necessary to use it, arguably in order to demonstrate to Muslims that their doctrines were sound in intellectual terms, and also to defend themselves against arguments intended to expose the incoherence of their beliefs.

Muslim Religious Thinking and Non-Muslim Religions

This one example indicates the growing power of Muslim theological thought in the third/ninth century, and its cogency as a force among non-Muslims as well as Muslims. Certainly, Muslim theological thinkers appeared fully confident in the proficiency of their logical techniques and in the teachings of their faith to present a complete portrayal of the nature of reality and to defend that against alternative versions in the form of other faiths. The story of how this competence and confidence developed in the early centuries is not as clear as one would like, but

---

[7] See n. 6 above.
[8] See e.g. the arguments on pp. 254–255 below.

from what can be gleaned it involved refutations of Christianity and other faiths almost as much as the presentation of positive doctrines.[9]

By the beginning of the third/ninth century Islamic theological thinking had developed into a distinctive discipline with its own issues and problems, and the specialists to engage with them. Chief among these specialists were the emerging groups of rationalist thinkers calling themselves Muʿtazila and centred on Baṣra and Baghdad. And chief among the issues with which they were engaged were the being of God, expressed in terms of the descriptive attributes used of him, the nature of contingent reality, understood by most in terms of division into atoms of matter and accidents that conferred qualities upon these, and the issue of how humans could be morally responsible while God was all-powerful, expressed in terms of autonomy at the moment of performing an action. Nearly all the leading thinkers who were active at this time are known to have held views on these and other matters, and usually to have written works on them. Their works were often attacks on opposing suggestions as well as expositions of keenly argued positions.

Among works on the major issues of Muslim theological debate about the nature of God and the world, and the relationship between the two, and attacks on other individuals or groups, are usually to be found works on or against non-Muslim religions, in particular Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism or some other form of dualism. Most theologians are credited with such works, and nearly all the leading specialists of the first ʿAbbasid century wrote one or more attacks on the followers of these faiths. It would appear that such works were as much a part of theological discourse as questions arising within Islamic thinking.

But maybe it is artificial to make a distinction between arguments directed against views held by Muslim opponents and non-Muslims. The Qurʾān, after all, depicts, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians as recipients of revelations that were in line with its own message, so it would naturally follow that Muslims should look on them as part of the same general dispensation as they were themselves. So the divergences they noted in the teachings of Christians and others were from the norms they themselves sought to understand and articulate in their

---

[9] For an earlier formulation of the argument in this and the following two sections, cf. D. Thomas, 'Dialogue with other Faiths as an Aspect of Islamic Theology', in T.L. Hettema and A. van der Kooij, eds, *Religious Polemics in Context*, Assen, The Netherlands, 2004, pp. 93–109.

own thinking. And just as they wrote against opponents who in principle based themselves upon the Qur'ān and the tradition that stemmed from that, they would as readily write against those who based themselves on an equivalent though earlier revelation in order to bring to their attention the errors of their articulations and to draw them into agreement with the formulations which they themselves promoted as the true expression of Qur'ān-based teachings.

The practical working out of this can be seen in two works from the early and mid third/ninth century.[10] In one, the Zaydī Imām al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Rassī shows how the doctrine of the Trinity violates the norms of reason that are embedded in Islamic teachings about God, and how the belief that Christ was divine violates both elementary reason and the witness of Christian scripture itself. And in the other, the independent-minded monotheist Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq demonstrates at length how the two doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, as they are presented by the Nestorians, Jacobites and Melkites, cannot compel acceptance because they are logically inept. Both Muslims share the apparent attitude that Christians have deviated from the truth, which is that God is totally one and totally other, and so have sunk into doctrinal incoherence and inconsistency. But they could be educated out of their errors, and presumably made to see where they were wrong and where the path of truth lay.

What is striking about these two refutations of Christianity—and it seems from the more plentiful surviving works from the next century that they followed a convention in this—is that they do not actually focus on Christianity as a set of beliefs and practices, but on the two doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation or Uniting of the divine and human natures in Christ. It is these that interest the authors, and they have detached them from the related doctrines of the atonement, for example, for examination alone.

This is a distinguishing feature of nearly all the known works written in early Islamic times against Christianity. It might be explained by the nature of the arguments that were current among Christians at the time of the coming of Islam and through ensuing centuries, when the character of Christ as both human and divine, and the mode in which his two natures subsisted within him, caused fierce splits into

---

[10] D. Thomas, 'Christian Theologians and New Questions', in E. Grypeou, M. Swanson and D. Thomas, eds, *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with early Islam*, Leiden, 2006, pp. 257–276.

rival denominations and sects. Outsiders might easily assume that this
issue was the main distinguishing feature of Christianity, and would
thus focus on this and ignore the beliefs it articulated about the being
of God uniting with the human in order to bring about the salvation of
the world.

There may be truth in this surmise, but a fuller and more fit-
ting explanation is given by looking at Muslim rather than Christian
preoccupations. The great doctrine of *tawḥīd*, the insistent emphasis
upon the oneness of God, was being developed in the early centuries
into a description that made God both radically one in his being (so
dense a singularity for the Muʻtazila that they would not admit inter-
nal differentiation by describing him as living by an eternal attribute
of life or knowing by an eternal attribute of knowledge since these
attributes must be formally distinct from his essence), and also entirely
distinct from his creation, so that he shared nothing with what he had
made and could eventually be discerned only by what he was not. For
thinkers who were keenly expounding doctrines such as this, of the
radical oneness and utter distinctiveness of God, the doctrines of the
Trinity and Incarnation would appear as anathema. In turning their
attention to them, they would have been motivated as strongly by a
desire to defend their own doctrines by showing the unsustainability of
alternatives as by a duty to show to followers of earlier monotheistic
revelations how, and sometimes why, they had gone wrong.

It may well be that among the early scholars who wrote works
against Christian doctrines there was an attitude that these were the
outcome of wrong-headed misinterpretations of scripture, either be-
cause the original scripture was contaminated, or because extraneous
concepts and methods had been introduced into Christian thinking, or
a combination of these. Such explanations certainly appear in works
from later times, and there are hints that some of them, at least,
were known at an early date. It would be altogether likely that if
a scholar was pressed about Christians he might well acknowledge
they were holders of an earlier revelation that in origins agreed with
his own, and were recipients of a true dispensation given by God.
However he articulated his thoughts, he would almost certainly regard
these 'People of the Book' as related to himself in faith, but gone
wrong. And so he might judge his own activity in arguing against them
as educational in some degree, intended to show them as clearly as
possible and according to norms they must acknowledge that the ideas
about faith which they held were incoherent, irrational and generally

untenable. Certainly, a reading of such as surviving work as Abū ʿĪsā's *Radd* supports such an interpretation.

But this educative attitude towards the beliefs of fellow monotheists is so close to a sense of being right oneself that it is hard to distinguish it from its allied attitude of defending Islam and of showing that it is the only reliable means of discerning the true being of God and the world. When al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm demonstrates in the opening stages of his *Radd* that Islam enshrines the rationally deducible principles of monotheism,[11] he appears to be doing just this.

Thus one finds that by the time works such as those presented here appear, Christian doctrine had been built into a larger structure of argumentation in which whatever educational purpose there had been in refuting it had more or less completely given way to the apologetic purpose of showing how it instanced the consequences of abandoning the straight path of monotheistic purity and espousing hybrid forms of belief. The practice of refuting Christian doctrines had no greater purpose than to complement the exposition of positive Islamic doctrine and to highlight its soundness and perfection by graphically showing how alternatives were ragged and inconsistent.

The Integration of Islamic Religious Thought

The beginning of the process by which the disparate subjects treated within Islamic theological thinking were gradually brought into integrated systems is no longer visible. But one sees what may be early evidence of systematisation in what appear to have been mainly descriptive works on non-Islamic religions written by authors active in the early third/ninth century. One of these, from Abū ʿĪsā al Warrāq, may well have been an account of rival forms of belief known in the Islamic world, in which differing claims were set together for the sake of comparison.[12] And from what can be recovered of the *Kitāb al-tawḥīd* of the Muʿtazilī-Murjiʾī Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Shabīb, a student of Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām and therefore a contemporary of Abū ʿĪsā in the early third/ninth century, it would appear that this work combined discussions of differing Muslim and non-Muslim teachings about the

---

[11] Thomas, 'Christian Theologians', pp. 260–263.
[12] D. Thomas, 'Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq and the History of Religions', *Journal of Semitic Studies* 41, 1996, pp. 275–290. Cf. pp. 21–22 below.

being and action of God with the author's own views on current issues
of debate concerning this topic.[13] All these works are lost, and so ideas
about their scopes and structures can only be speculative. But the traces
of them that remain in quotations and references in later authors do
suggest that they possessed at least a degree of integration, and more
importantly brought teachings and opinions from different religious
backgrounds into relation with one another and thus into critical ten-
sion.

One of the first works of this kind about which a description has
come down is the major compendium of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī
(d. 324/936), an elder contemporary of al-Māturīdī and like him the
eponym of one of the major schools of Sunnī theological thought. It
must have been among this important scholar's main works because it
is placed first in the list that was compiled by his later follower Abū
al-Qāsim Ibn ʿAsākir (d. 571/1176). The latter calls it simply *al-Fuṣūl*
(though this must be only one element of what was originally a longer
title), and he says that it contained refutations of non-Muslims, includ-
ing natural philosophers, materialists and fatalists, followed by 'Brah-
mins', Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, 'a vindication of reasoning
and rational argument and a refutation of those who denied that',
and also a refutation of the Muslim heretic Ibn al-Rāwandī's asser-
tions about the eternity of the world.[14] It was a work in twelve chapters
(*abwāb*), and so this description must cover only a selection of its con-
tents, though it tells enough to show that the *Fuṣūl* combined refutations
of those within the Muslim fold and those outside with some form of
epistemological discussion. Whether or not it contained these elements
in a systematic progression, somewhat like the works of al-Bāqillānī and
ʿAbd al-Jabbār that succeeded it in the fourth/tenth century, it seems
certainly to have brought together arguments for and against a range
of topics into one connected discussion.

One is tempted to imagine that in addition to the contents listed
by Ibn ʿAsākir, it also contained expositions of Islamic teachings as
al-Ashʿarī understood them. And indeed there is justification for this
when one examines the contents of the *Lumaʿ fī al-radd ʿalā ahl al-
zaygh wa-al-bidaʿ* (*Highlights of the Refutation of the Deviators and Innovators*),

---

[13] J. Pessagno, 'The Reconstruction of the Thought of Muḥammad ibn Shabīb',
Journal of the American Oriental Society 104, 1984, pp. 445–453.

[14] Trans. R. McCarthy, *The Theology of al-Ashʿarī*, Beirut, 1953, pp. 211–212.

one of the few works by al-Ashʿarī that survives, and his only systematic work that can be examined at first hand.

The *Lumaʿ* contains ten brief chapters on: God's existence and attributes, the Qurʾān (as the word of God) and the will of God, God's will encompassing all that occurs, the beatific vision, God's determining of events, human capability, the imputation of justice and injustice to God, faith, the fate of believers, and the leadership of the community.[15] These clearly address matters that were debated by al-Ashʿarī and his contemporaries, as well as by their predecessors in the third/ninth century. And while in themselves they represent technical points of difference within current Muslim theology, they also show that these points were perceived as part of a single progression, in which discussion about the being of God in himself led into the relationship between him and the world, individual faith and responsibility, and finally the rule of the Muslim community.

Al-Ashʿarī says at the beginning of the *Lumaʿ* that he is writing it as a brief or abridged work (*kitāb mukhtaṣar*) 'which will contain a summary exposition of the arguments which elucidate what is true and refute what is vain and empty assertion'.[16] And it must surely be an abridgement of a larger work in which the points it contains were treated more fully and linked more explicitly together, and the exposition of the author's own theological views were combined with refutation of others. A possible contender may well have been the work that comes immediately before the *Lumaʿ* in Ibn ʿAsākir's list, the *K. Īḍāḥ al-burhān fī al-radd ʿalā ahl al-zaygh wa-al-ṭughyān* (*The Elucidation of the Proof in Refutation of the Deviators and Unbelievers*), which has a similar title. This work, according to the list, which it should be said Ibn ʿAsākir compiled on the basis of a list given in one of al-Ashʿarī's own works, was an introduction to a longer work, the *K. al-mūjiz* (*The Epitome*), which was like the *Fuṣūl* in comprising twelve chapters (*abwāb*) and containing 'various opinions of adversaries, both Muslim and non-Muslim', and may well have been a condensed version of it.

Brief notes attached to a list of works that have vanished, even by their own author, must warn against drawing inferences too definitely. But if the *Fuṣūl* and *Lumaʿ* are connected by the latter being an abbreviation at third remove of the contents and structure of the former, then there is some likelihood that the *Fuṣūl* was a systematic work of

---

[15] See the edition and translation in McCarthy, *Theology of al-Ashʿarī*.
[16] McCarthy, *Theology of al-Ashʿarī*, p. 5.

some kind that combined the presentation of positive doctrine with the refutation of Muslim and non-Muslim opponents, including Christians. And even if the two are not connected in any linear descent, the *Luma'* must surely contain in abbreviated form the kind of arguments that its author's major work, the *Fuṣūl*, will have contained in more elaborate and nuanced versions.

What this amounts to is that in the case of al-Ash'arī, writing sometime in the early fourth/tenth century, we have possibly one of the earliest systematic theological compendiums, in which Christianity, together with doctrines from other faiths, was treated as part of Muslim theological discourse. The process that can be seen in the extant works from this time and later, as presented below, seems to have been a normal part of theological activity by the time the first of them, al-Māturīdī's *K. al-tawḥīd*, was written.

It is difficult to say when this form of synthesised theological compendium first appeared, but between the mid third/ninth century and the beginning of the fourth/tenth century a change had clearly occurred, from works in which Christianity was treated in isolation to these large scale works in which it was treated together with other faiths. This is not to say that works written expressly about and against Christianity were no longer written—both al-Ash'arī at the beginning of the century[17] and 'Abd al-Jabbār towards the end[18] are credited with such works—but it does indicate a significant change in attitude. For the fact that Christian doctrines were now refuted in the context of discussions about Muslim doctrines and the refutations of Muslim and other opponents, and that these doctrines were always the ones that challenged the Muslim doctrine of divine unity, suggests that their main interest for Muslims was to support the validity of their own interpretations of *tawḥīd* by providing unviable counter examples. The inconsistencies and lack of logic that could easily be uncovered within them gave clear evidence that only the Islamic formulation was tenable, and their errors provided an unmistakable warning against lowering the guard upon rigorous expositions of Islamic belief.

---

[17] See nos. 84 and 86 in the list in McCarthy, *Theology of al-Ash'arī*, p. 227.

[18] See G.S. Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu, 'Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins*, Leiden, 2004, p. 60, for a discussion of the historicity of this work.

The Function of Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theological Works

The subsidiary function given to Christian doctrines in these works that are first clearly traceable to the beginning of the fourth/tenth century serves also to indicate that the perceived threat from Christian, as well as other non-Islamic claims, to portray divinity accurately had receded by comparison with the period fifty to a hundred years earlier when writers such as Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq attached high importance to discovering as accurately as possible what Christians believed in order to demonstrate they were wrong. In the works presented here, Christianity has been simplified into a set of formulaic teachings, information about them has often been derived from identifiable Muslim literary sources rather than from Christians themselves, and views from Christian interlocutors, while not entirely absent, are few. Maybe what is to be seen here is evidence both of the withdrawal of Christian theologians over time from the active debates that constantly goaded Muslims into acute and inventive ripostes from earlier in the ʿAbbasid era, and also of a maturing of Muslim theological thinking into a form where its relationship with rival religious claims was now clear and, in the minds of its practitioners, its completeness and perfection were accomplished.

The works presented here certainly bear out such an observation. If, for example, one looks at the long and curious list of teachings about Christ and Christian religious practices given by al-Nāshiʾ al-Akbar,[19] one is made to wonder whether this was anything more to him than an antiquarian curiosity. Certainly, he makes no further use of it elsewhere in his refutation, so it stands as a witness to Christian errancies and as an object of pity and ridicule. There is also the brief account of Christian doctrines given by Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī, from the same time as al-Nāshiʾ.[20] This stands in stark comparison with the detailed equivalents of al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm and Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq from a few decades earlier,[21] where careful attempts are made to distinguish the differences between the main Christian denominations, and there is evidence of concentrated research into the origins of their doctrinal formulations.

---

[19] Below pp. 42–59.

[20] Below pp. 226–227.

[21] Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm, *Radd ʿalā al-Naṣārā*, ed. I. di Matteo, 'Confutazione contro i Cristiani dello zaydita al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm', *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 9, 1921–1922, pp. 314.8–318.13; Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, *Radd ʿalā al-thalāth firaq min al-Naṣārā*, ed. D. Thomas, *Anti-Christian Polemic in Early Islam, Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Trinity'*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 66–77.

Abū ʿAlī's account, on the other hand, is condensed into brief proposi-
tions which stand in isolation, disconnected from their historical roots
and the denomination that upholds them, as abstract hypotheses to
be tested according to *kalām* method, with the clear expectation they
will not survive the process. Then, thirdly, there is al-Māturīdī's attack
on the belief that Christ is divine, a concentrated succession of over-
abbreviated points that brings together an array of earlier Muslim argu-
ments.[22] There is nothing here about any other element of Christian
belief, because the author's purpose at this point is to show that Christ
was human, in accordance with Muslim beliefs, as part of his wider
intention in this section of his treatise to show that God has communi-
cated with his creation by means of the prophetic messengers referred
to in the Qurʾān.

These three examples indicate that the authors of these works only
thought of Christian doctrines and beliefs as material that could be
used to drive home their points about the curious errors and logical fal-
lacies among these other believers. They did not present a serious alter-
native to Muslim belief, having been scrutinised and exposed for the
threadbare creations they were. By the time that al-Bāqillānī and ʿAbd
al-Jabbār came to incorporate arguments against the Trinity and Incar-
nation into their systematic treatises, any possible threat had retreated
completely and these doctrines served only to emphasise the strength
and truth of Muslim doctrines.

Christians and Kalām Methods

There is evidence in the works presented here that Christians continued
to be actively engaged in the defence of their beliefs and in discussion
with Muslim counterparts. But this evidence too, at least as it stands, is
indicative of the ascendancy of Muslim theology, and Christians having
to work hard to find ways of showing their doctrines could be proved
coherent in the terms that were used within it.

At the beginning of the fourth/century, al-Nāshiʾ al-Akbar refers
obliquely to Christians comparing the divine hypostases in the Trini-
tarian Godhead with the accidents that endow qualities upon mate-
rial substances.[23] They make the point that whereas accidents can be

[22] Below pp. 96–117.
[23] Below pp. 66–69, §33 and n. 60.

of blackness or whiteness they are nevertheless identical as accidents, and in the same way the hypostases are identical even though they are differentiated as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ease with which al-Nāshiʾ goes on to expose its weaknesses and its inappropriateness for the purpose to which the Christians have put it suggests that while its Christian inventors had enough acquaintance with the methods of *kalām* thinking to recognise the superficial potential of this element as a means of explaining and justifying the character of the hypostases, they were not sufficiently versed in the discipline to perceive the implications of what they were doing. They were hardly Christian *mutakallimūn*, able to employ current theological idioms for their own purposes, but rather give the impression of apologists seizing upon points that might bolster their position.

Some years later, al-Bāqillānī refers to an individual Christian (*fa-in qāla minhum qāʾil*) who attempts to compare his own doctrine of the Trinity with the Muslim's doctrine of the divine attributes.[24] This Christian says that just as in al-Bāqillānī's Ashʿarī interpretation the attributes are neither identical with God himself nor different from him, bringing into play the view shared by al-Bāqillāni and those who agreed with him that the attributes are formally distinct entities though not ontologically discrete from the essence of God, so in his own Christian interpretation the hypostases are identifiable from the substance of God although not different from it. Since al-Bāqillānī's answer to this comparison is forced and unconvincing,[25] and this intervention does little to further his argument, there is a good chance that this Christian voice is real. It knows enough about al-Bāqillānī's own particular version of the doctrine of the divine attributes to point to this comparison (it could not do this with the Muʿtazilī doctrine of the attributes), and since the comparison involves the particular interpretation of the divine attributes that al-Ashʿarī and his followers developed in the fourth/tenth century, following his change of heart from Muʿtazilism, then it is likely to come from an actual contemporary of al-Bāqillānī.

So here is an attempt to take the argument back to the Muslim polemicist, not unlike ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī a century before, in a show of well-informed, inventive and vigorous argumentation. But, at least in the form in which it is preserved, it is defensive, striving to find a way to explain the Trinity that a Muslim theologian might accept. There is

---

[24] Below pp. 164–167, §17.
[25] Below pp. 164–167, §17, and n. 37.

no sign that it forms part of a wider articulation of the doctrine from a
Christian who is imbued in Muslim theological method and confidently
expressing his beliefs in an idiom which he shares with co-religionists
and Muslim *mutakallimūn*. Rather it is a stab at an idea that might make
an explanation and maybe win agreement.

Later in the century, ʿAbd al-Jabbār mentions other anonymous
voices who try to get him to accept their interpretation of the Incarna-
tion by comparing it with Abū ʿAlī al-Jubbāʾī's understanding of what
the Qurʾān is. According to this Muʿtazilī master, as they portray him,
the Qurʾān can exist on a writing surface or someone's tongue as well
as on the preserved tablet in the presence of God.[26] They coin this anal-
ogy as part of their argument that the Son united with Jesus by inher-
ing within him although the Godhead remained unchanged, which in
ʿAbd al-Jabbār's logic is impossible, and he is compelled to explain at
some length that even though they may be right, in Abū ʿAlī's terms
the word would still be in a particular physical location, and the same
would apply to God with the consequence that God would be subject
to physical limitations.

Again, there is no reason to doubt the reality of these Christians.
And they show considerable tactical acumen in bringing in a revered
figure of ʿAbd al-Jabbār's school (his own teacher's teacher's teacher
and father), as well as insight in drawing the parallel they do. In this
they compare with al-Bāqillānī's antagonists, and show similar telling
awareness of teachings that their Muslim interlocutor would respect
and have to take seriously. But they also show similar lack of the deeper
awareness that might anticipate the Muslim scholar's objection and
the ability to circumvent it. They offer a polemical jibe, rather than
what seems to be a considered view, and it withers under detailed
interrogation.

Of course, it would be astonishing if either al-Bāqillānī or ʿAbd al-
Jabbār quoted Christian scholars whose arguments compelled accep-
tance. Impartial quoting of others' views would not serve their purpose,
though they would not be helped either by distorting what their oppo-
nents said or misrepresenting them so that informed readers saw they
were creating straw men to destroy. Nevertheless, the absence of any
sustained Christian objections or alternative formulations of faith that
might occasion more fully engaged arguments from the Muslim theolo-

---

[26] Below pp. 322–323, §54.

gians points to the fact that these were not to be found, and that the isolated attempts recorded by the two theologians are not part of a larger Christian theology expressed in terms of the *kalām* that Muslims had developed over two centuries up to this point and that Arabic-speaking Christians had come to know.

These are only scraps of evidence, and the absence of anything more should warn sternly against over-categorisation. It is possible that there was at this time a Christian exposition of the Trinity, Incarnation and other doctrines that built upon such foundations as the apologetic works of the Nestorian ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī, the Jacobite Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rāʾiṭa and others at the start of the third/ninth century. But there is no record of this, and no known Christians who could have produced it. One must therefore ask whether the fact that the only Christian theologian's name known to any of these four Muslims is that of the early third/ninth century Theodore Abū Qurra, whom ʿAbd al-Jabbār refers to incompletely as 'Qurra the Melkite',[27] is coincidence, or whether there were no Christians who could command attention from self-confident Muslims as they developed their systematic theologies and saw how convincing their analyses of reality were.[28] Maybe the reality is that just as Muslims saw Christian doctrines as useful only as instances of erroneous theologising, so Christians distanced themselves from involvement in this particular Muslim theological activity and followed interests elsewhere.

The net result is that increasingly through the fourth/tenth century there appears to have been disengagement between this strand of Muslim intellectual discourse and Christian theology. From the Muslim side, at least, there is a sense of an encounter having been won and an opponent overcome. Christianity was marginalised, and undeserving of serious intellectual attention.

Certainly, the four excerpts presented here give the strong impression that this was the case. Their developed confidence in their own rightness is palpable, and their ability to counter any arguments or propositions that conflicted with their own irrepressible. Three of them come from giants of Islamic theology, al-Māturīdī the putative founder of the Māturīdī school, one of the two main traditions of Sunnī theol-

---

[27] Below pp. 362–363, §76.

[28] It is telling that the only known Christian response to any of these works was al-Ṣafī Ibn al-ʿAssāl's refutation of al-Nāshiʾ al-Akbar in the seventh/thirteenth century; see below pp. 19–20.

ogy; al-Bāqillānī, the consolidator of the Ashʿarī school, the other main
tradition of Sunnī theology; and ʿAbd al-Jabbār, the leading Muʿtazilī
theologian of his day. The fourth comes from the rather wayward
Baghdad Muʿtazilī al-Nāshiʾ al-Akbar, and it owes its survival to the
Christian refutation where parts are quoted and answered. Together
they give a vivid and consummate account of Muslim theological atti-
tudes towards Christianity in the fourth/tenth century. While this is
inevitably one-sided and cannot claim to be complete, it bears testi-
mony to what appears to be a decline in Christian intellectual stature
under the strong and vigorous flourishing of Islamic theology. The
latter could afford increasingly to ignore Christianity and other rival
religious claims as its coherence and completeness were made unmis-
takably evident. The consequence was growing indifference to Chris-
tian intellectual traditions, and a parting of ways that had previously
appeared to run together. The separation was established, with few
signs of further convergence.